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Four Not-to-Miss Photography Shows

By Vicki Goldberg

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They Came to America

“Augustus Sherman: Aliens or Americans?,” a pointedly timely show at Steven Kasher Gallery, presents 35 photographs made by Sherman on Ellis Island between 1905 and 1920. It opens with the display of a book of that title, published in 1906, with a Sherman photograph as its frontispiece. Howard B. Grose, the author, begins with this: “It is not a question as to whether the aliens will come. They have come, millions of them; they are now coming, at the rate of a million a year. They come from every clime, country and condition; and they are of every sort: good, bad and indifferent.” He continues, “What they will be and do then depends largely upon what our American Protestant Christianity does for them now.” The book, presented as part of the materials for a course for missionaries, was strongly anti-immigration and especially disparaging of immigrants from Eastern European countries.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

The more things change, the more things stay the same.

Sherman, chief clerk at the Ellis Island Immigration Station, was on the immigrants' side. Not a professional photographer but a good one, he was clearly interested in the diverse origins and customs of those who came to these shores. He persuaded many to pose for him in their best clothes or national dress, which they had presumably worn to make a good impression in the place they hoped to call home. The Ellis Island Immigration Museum has more than 250 of his pictures.

Photographs do not explain themselves; without captions, they are vulnerable to widely differing interpretations, often unintended by the photographer. Sherman's sympathetic portraits were used in anti-immigration publications, like Grose's book, without attribution. His pictures are sober, respectful, formal, nicely printed and centered on the subject, with mainly, but not exclusively, plain backgrounds that insist that the sitter is worth looking at — is, in fact, the only thing worth looking at. He took family portraits that speak to the enormous effort some made to get here. One family poses with nine children, eight of them boys. The parents look rather tired.

The variety of headgear, costumes, decoration and jewelry is like a tour through Europe, Russia, parts of northern Africa and the Middle East early in the 20th century. What Sherman has photographed is the diversity of America as it defined itself, as it developed a century ago.

Resourceful enough to get here, most immigrants did all right, if only in menial jobs. There is a story about an Italian man who said he came because he heard the streets were paved with gold, only to discover that not only weren't they paved with gold but that they weren't paved at all — and that he was meant to pave them.

Sherman photographed Americans to whom we owe a debt. They made this country richer in many ways, not merely by paving roads and shortening trousers. They were the promise of a melting pot that has never quite been fulfilled. This is how they looked before they stepped into a new life, most likely spent in tenements or trying to learn how to farm. Thanks to Sherman, we can look into the eyes of people who were aliens for a long-ago moment and acknowledge them as Americans just like us.

'AUGUSTUS SHERMAN: ALIENS OR AMERICANS?' Through Dec. 23 at Steven Kasher Gallery, 515 West 26th Street, Manhattan.